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ABSTRACT

National activities are underway in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States to extend the right to free elementary and fundamental education to adults, and to transform the many local, independently acting programs into systems of state-supported, free education for adults across the life span. This paper summarizes these activities in those three nations in these five categories: (1) scale of need, or determining how many adults are in need of adult basic skills education; (2) access to provision, or determining how many adults are aware of, have access to, and enroll in adult education and literacy education programs; (3) nature of provision, or determining the nature of the delivery system for meeting the needs of adult literacy provision, including the use of information and communication technology; (4) quality of provision, or determining the nature of and need for improved instructional quality, including teacher qualifications and establishing content and outcome standards for programs; and (5) accountability of provision, or improving methods for determining achievements of programs in terms of student learning outcomes and broader impacts for the adult, the family, the workplace, and the community. (Contains 14 references.) (KC)

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Reforming Adult Literacy Education

Transforming Local Programs Into National Systems in Canada, the United Kingdom, & the United States

Thomas G. Sticht

April 2001

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Preface

In the middle of the 20th century, on December 10, 1948, the United Nations proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Among the rights claimed for all peoples of the world were rights to education expressed in Article 26:

> Article 26. (1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental states. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
>
> (2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
>
> (3) Parents shall have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States national activities are underway that promise to extend the right to free elementary and fundamental education to adults. Having for many decades provided a variety of programs, many arising from charitable work by religious groups and others, activities are today underway to transform these many local, independently acting programs into systems of state-supported, free education for adults across the life span. This brief paper summarizes activities in these three nations under five categories:

> 1. Scale of Need: determining how many adults are in need of adult basic skills education.
>
> 2. Access to Provision: determining how many adults are aware of, have access to and enroll in adult education and literacy education programs (provision).
>
> 3. Nature of Provision: determining the nature of the delivery system for meeting the needs of adult literacy provision, including the use of information and communication technology (ICT).
>
> 4. Quality of Provision: determining the nature of and need for improved instructional quality, including teacher qualifications and establishing content and outcome standards for programs.
>
> 5. Accountability of Provision: improving methods for determining achievements of programs in terms of student learning outcomes and broader impacts for the adult, family, workplace and community.

The hope is that by providing this summary, the activities of the three nations to improve their adult literacy education systems may be further encouraged and strengthened through the synergy of international awareness and co-operation.

Tom Sticht
April 2001

Reforming Adult Literacy Education
Transforming Local Programs Into National Systems In Canada, the United Kingdom & the United States

Recent policy oriented reports in Canada[1], the United Kingdom[2], and the United States[3] have outlined reform movements in each nation based on the growing recognition of the multiple returns to investments in adult literacy education, particularly those concerned with workforce development, discussed in Part 1 of this report. The reform movements in each of these three nations have included the establishment of national government offices to provide leadership, coordination, and funding for five major activities:

1. Scale of Need: determining how many adults are in need of adult literacy, including numeracy (i.e., basic skills), education.

A major effort for determining the scale of need for adult literacy education took place in the mid-1990s when Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States joined with what was eventually nineteen other member nations of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to take part in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS).[4] Using door-to-door sampling methods, the IALS developed performance tasks for prose, document and quantitative scales that were used to assign adults to five literacy levels (Level 1-low to Level 5-high literacy). Additionally, the IALS developed a scale for the adult's self-assessment of their literacy ability including rating categories of poor, moderate, good, excellent (and no response).

Table 2.1. Comparison of IALS test score data for the prose scale with adult's self-assessed reading skills. Data for United States.

	IALS Prose Literacy Levels			
	1	2	3	4/5
Numbers	33M	42M	52M	34M
Percents	21	26	32	21
M=millions of adults				
Self-Assessment	1	2	3	4
Numbers	9M	11M	54M	86M

Using the document performance tasks, 23.7 percent of United States adults ages 16-65 were assigned to literacy level 1, the lowest level of literacy, while in Canada the percentage assigned to document literacy Level 1 was 18.2, and in the United Kingdom 23.3 percent of adults were assigned to document literacy Level 1. Similar percentages, with a little variation, held for the prose and quantitative literacy scales and the assignment of adults to Literacy Level 1 on those scales.

Using the performance scales then, about one fifth of adults aged 16-65 in these three countries were considered to be "at risk" for social inclusiveness due to poor literacy. This would come to about 32 million adults in the US, 3.3 million in Canada, and 7 million in the UK.

Self-Perceived Literacy and Numeracy Skills. Using the adult's self-assessments of their reading abilities for work and daily life, grouped by the document scale results, fewer than 5 percent of adults in either Canada, the UK, or the U. S. rated their reading as poor. Using a 5 percent estimate for these three nations, some 8 million adults in the U. S., less than 1 million in Canada, and fewer than 2 million in the U. K. would consider themselves "at risk" for poor reading. Similar results held for self-assessments of writing and numeracy and with self-assessments grouped by the prose and quantitative scales.

Using the foregoing self-perceived estimates of reading ability, there appears to be a considerable discrepancy between the performance test and the self-assessments in determining the percentages and numbers of adults "at risk" for poor literacy in these three nations. These differences may account, to at least some extent, for the finding in all three nations that many fewer adults enroll in literacy programs than might be expected on the basis of their numbers as determined by the performance tests.

If it is adult's self-perceived need for literacy education that determines whether or not they will enroll in literacy programs, then it might be useful in national assessments of adult literacy to delve further into adult's self-perceptions, what explains their self-perceptions, what information would help them better assess their literacy skills, and to provide respondents who assess themselves as poor in literacy with information about how they might locate adult literacy programs. It might also be useful to determine other education needs or desires so that the adult education and literacy provision systems in these and other nations might better align themselves with adult educational needs.

2. Access to Provision: determining how many adults are aware of, have access to and enroll in adult education and literacy education programs (provision).

Reforms relating to improving access to provision have taken the approach of conducting studies to better determine why adults do or do not participate in adult literacy or basic skills programs and sought ways to increase outreach to adults.

As indicated above, in establishing the scale of need for adult basic skills (literacy, numeracy) education, there are considerable differences in the percentages of adults considered to be "at risk" and hence in need of literacy or basic skills instructional services based on IALS performance test data and the actual numbers of adults who seek out literacy instruction and enroll in programs. In Canada, for instance, it has been reported based on IALS data that some 22 percent of Canadians have serious difficulties with any type of printed material, yet only a small fraction (5 to 10 percent) of adults eligible for literacy education have ever enrolled in literacy courses.[5] Some 43 percent of Canadians who were seeking information about literacy and upgrading education across Canada in the study by Long[5] did not enroll because of program or policy-related problems, such as not being called back, long waiting lists, inconvenient course times, wrong content or teaching structure, and unhelpful program contact (p. 4).

In the United Kingdom, the IALS assigned around 23 percent of adults to literacy Level 1 (some 7,000,000 adults)[4] while participants in adult literacy programs around that time included fewer than 5 percent of that number. To increase access to provision, the United Kingdom has set as a target the reduction by 750,000 the number of adults who have difficulty with literacy and numeracy by 2004 (p. 4)[2] To meet these targets the government has set aside up to £1.5 billion pounds over the next three years and created a number of special programs, including several aimed at providing work-based literacy and numeracy skills. This includes trade unions, Local Skills Councils to facilitate employer training and development programs, the University for Industry which will rely heavily upon information and communications technology (ICT) to deliver basic skills upgrading to workers, National Training Organizations to develop networks for training, and others.

To determine what might motivate adults with poor basic skills to seek to improve them, the Basic Skills Agency of the UK conducted a study called *Getting Better Basic Skills*.[6] The research focused on adult's perceptions of their own skills, why they wanted to improve their skills, their access to learning programs, the content of the programs and what would encourage them to try and improve their skills. Significant findings included: a third of adults thought that their basic skills needed improving; 29% of adults questioned said they would definitely take up a basic skills course, and 42% said they would probably do so.

Fewer than 10% of the more than 40 million adults who lack a high school diploma in the U.S. enroll in the Adult Education and Literacy System of the U.S. in a given year. However, as of 2001, no major efforts with major funding, as in the United Kingdom, were underway to reach out to adults in the United States.[7]

The main reasons for wanting to improve basic skills were both emotional ("to feel better about yourself/ your skills") and practical (" to be better at everyday tasks which involve basic skills"); the majority of adults (41%) preferred teaching to be in their own home; yet most adults preferred to learn with a teacher, however ICT facilities were also very important; factors motivating adults to improve their basic skills included being able to learn on a computer, being able to improve computer skills and basic skills at the same time, getting a qualification and being able to attend a course near home.

The Basic Skills Agency concluded that the research clearly indicated that there is an existing interest in improving basic skills among those adults in need in the UK and that it is also clear that only by considering what the learners want will it be possible to make progress towards the targets set out in the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills.

3. Nature of Provision: determining the nature of the delivery system for meeting the needs of adult literacy provision, including the use of information and communication technology (ICT).

The delivery of adult basic skills education for adults is a highly complex activity because of the great diversity of adults in ages, native languages, years of education, and experiences across the life span. Confronted with such great diversity, adult literacy education in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States takes place in numerous settings ranging from formal school houses or learning centers to store fronts, prison cells, homes for the elderly, church buildings, and private homes.

In Canada, the National Literacy Secretariat offers some central coordination and R & D support, but adult literacy education is primarily a provincial activity and involves a plethora of providers working under different rules, regulations, and procedures for the conduct of adult literacy programs across Canada. This lead participants in the National Summit on Literacy and Productivity of October 2000 to *call for an integrated, pan-Canadian system of adult education and lifelong learning* with appropriate structures to support such a system.[1]

In the United Kingdom, studies in the mid-1990s showed that about 60 percent of basic skills students received basic skills provision in Further Education colleges, while some 20 percent received such training in Local Education Agencies. The remaining 20 percent or so of programs took place in prisons, training organizations, voluntary organizations, employer-based settings and a few other contexts (p. 60).[8]

Unlike Canada, in the UK funding for adult basic skills provision is very much a central government responsibility. In 2000, this central government role was enhanced by the formation of a new Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit in the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE).[2] This unit oversees a new adult literacy provision scheme for the UK that involves the expenditure of some £1.5 billion over the next three years to provide adult basic skills education. The Unit will work closely with newly formed Learning and Skills Councils that will have responsibilities for assessing local need and ensuring that opportunities exist for adult basic skills education in local settings.

In the United States, as in Canada and the United Kingdom, there are numerous organizations that provide adult literacy education. But in the U.S. the main body of providers can be grouped into the Adult Education & Literacy System (AELS which was formed in 1966 when the Adult Education Act (AEA) was enacted.[9] The AEA brought adult educators at the local, state, and federal levels together to work under an agreed to set of common rules and regulations that began the process of systematizing adult education in the United States. Since then the AEA has undergone numerous amendments and name changes. It was renamed the National Literacy Act in 1991, and in 1998 it was incorporated into the Workforce Investment Act as Title 2, The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA).

Today, some 4,000 organizations operate under the rules and regulations of the AEFLA. Together they join the K-12 and Higher Education branches to form the nation's third major publicly funded branch of education. These thousands of educational institutions make-up the Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) of the United States and they provide learning opportunities for adults throughout their lives. [9]

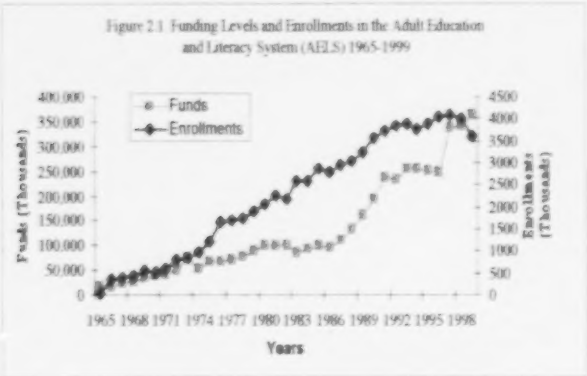

Figure 2.1 Funding Levels and Enrollments in the Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) 1965-1999

From 1966 through 1999, the number of adults enrolled in the diverse programs funded wholly or in part through the federal government's Division of Adult Education and Literacy increased at an average rate of almost a 100,000 per year, growing from around 377,000 in 1966

The AELS serves those most in need of education. Of some 31 million enrollees in the AELS from 1992 through 1999, 7.9 million were the working poor, over 3.3 million were welfare recipients, 9.3 million were unemployed and 2.2 million were incarcerated. Over two-thirds of the 15 million enrollees during 1992-1996 had not completed 12 years of education or received a high school diploma and over 3.4 million were immigrants.

***4. Quality of Provision:** determining the nature of and need for improved instructional quality, including teacher qualifications and establishing content and outcome standards for programs.*

In Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States there are common findings about adult literacy education.

(1) Only a small proportion of adults deemed to be in need of provision actually enroll (see above).

(2) Studies of participation in adult education have repeatedly identified three major categories of barriers to participation in adult literacy education.[10]

Situational barriers include baby-sitting problems, work schedules, transportation problems and so on. Most recently in Canada Long[5] referred to these as "socioeconomic-circumstantial" factors and found that 30 percent of adults in her research reported such factors as deterrents to participation in adult literacy education.

Dispositional barriers stem from the psychological, personality, and attitudinal make-up of the student, and their beliefs about their abilities to learn. In Canada, Long[5] referred to these as "cognitive-emotive" factors and reported that 15 percent of adults in her study cited such factors as deterrents to enrollment in programs.

Institutional barriers involve the instruction, policies, practices and requirements of programs. Long (2001) reported that 43 percent of those adults in her study reported what she called these types of "program/policy-related" barriers to participation.

Sticht et al. [10] engaged adult students in the San Diego area to study why adults did not participate in adult literacy education. Barriers reported by adult students that make it difficult for adults to pursue education were similar to those reported by Long[5] for Canada and Brooks[8] for the United Kingdom (Table 2.2).

Table 2.2. Reason for not attending adult school in San Diego	**Number citing**
Situational	
Too busy with work/family	29
No child care/baby-sitter	12
Work two jobs to support family	09
No money for transportation	04
Don't need school to work	04
	58
Dispositional	
Too old to learn, bad memory	16
Lack of self-esteem/shyness	10
No motivation, lack of interest	10
Lack of family/peer support	06
Prefer to watch TV & party	03
	45
Institutional	
School not relevant for needs	08
Frustrated/discouraged about school environment	06
Lack information about school	05
	19

(3) Dropout rates are high in all three nations. Long[5] reported dropout rates of 41 percent for males and 23 percent for females across Canada. Brooks et al. [8] reported dropout rates in the UK of 20 to 50 percent depending upon the type of program being attended. Generally, dropouts from briefer (about 12 week) intensive courses, 8 or so hours per week, were lower than from courses attended for only 2 to 4 hours per week. In the US,dropout rates in excess of 50 percent have been found in some studies and, as in the UK, greater persistence was found in intensive programs of shorter duration that are highly focussed on jobs.[10]

(4) Professionalism and preparation of teaching staff is a major concern in Canada, the UK and the US. Paid teachers in adult literacy education are generally part-time in all three nations and large numbers of tutors are unpaid volunteers. For some 13,201 teachers in the UK, Brooks et al. (p. 73)[8] reported that over 90 percent were part-time and there were an additional 12,046 volunteers, almost equal the number of paid staff. Data for 1998 from the U. S. Department of Education indicate that in the Adult Education and Literacy System of the US, of 92,019 paid personnel, only some 25 percent were full-time personnel and the system relied on an additional 85,924 unpaid volunteers for tutors. Hoddinott[11] reports similar findings for Canada, with most teachers being part-time, and the use of volunteers widely advocated.

Based on the studies of teaching in adult literacy education, all three nations have taken steps to improve the profession of adult literacy teaching. In addition to advocating for more funds to support more full-time teachers, all three nations have developed teacher training materials and procedures.

Table 2. 3. The Pro-Net Project for Professional Development in the United States: Competency Categories for Adult Educators [12]

1. Maintains Knowledge and Pursues Professional Development. Competencies for this area include those for obtaining and maintaining the requisite skills and content knowledge to guide the instructional process.

2. Organizes and Delivers Instruction. Competencies for this area include the development of instructional plans, sequence and pacing of classroom activities, and linking instruction to learner needs and abilities.

3. Manages Instructional Resources. Providing quality instruction requires an emphasis on competencies for managing instructional and planning time as well as learner time-on-task.

4. Continually Assesses and Monitors Learning. The competencies in this section focus on collecting and sharing information about learner needs and progress, and using the information to plan appropriate instruction.

5. Manages Program Responsibilities and Enhances Program Organization. Competencies in this section focus on collecting, managing, and sharing data and ideas to improve instruction and program quality.

6. Provides Learner Guidance and Referral. Relevant competencies in this area include the knowledge of appropriate referral services and the ability to communicate learner needs to other service providers within the program.

In Canada, literacy.ca, the newsletter of the Movement for Canadian Literacy discussed the professionalization of adult literacy education in its February 2000 issue. It reports on work by the Ontario Literacy Coalition to produce the *Adult Literacy Educators Skills List* . Provision of training for adult educators was also recommended by the National Literacy Summit on Literacy and Productivity in October 2000.[1]

In the United States, the U. S. Department of Education's Division of Adult Education and Literacy has implemented the Pro-Net project to develop competencies and performance indicators for adult literacy educators.[12]

In the United Kingdom, a large effort to improve adult literacy education through teacher training was called for by the Department for Education and Employment 's Adult Basic Skills Strategy Unit as part of the implementation of a new national core curriculum for adult literacy and numeracy. [2]

5. Skills, content and curriculum standards have been the focus of government and professional agencies in Canada, the United States and United Kingdom. For instance, in November 1998, Human Resources Development Canada produced a list of *Essential Skills* that people use to carry out a wide variety of everyday life and occupational tasks (Table 2.4, column A). The different Essential Skills are also arrayed by complexity level, to indicate progression in skills development.

The *Equipped for the Future* project in the United States[13] presents content standards for what adults should know and be able to do to fulfill their life roles as parents/family members, citizen/community members, or workers (Table 2.4, column B).

Table 2.4. Examples of skills, content and curriculum standards efforts for Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom.

A. ESSENTIAL SKILLS-Canada	**B. EQUIPPED FOR THE FUTURE STANDARDS-United States**	**C. National Standards for Adult Literacy and Numeracy-United Kingdom**
Reading Text	COMMUNICATION SKILLS	LITERACY
Use of Documents	Read with understanding	Speaking and listening
Writing	Convey ideas in writing	- Listen and respond
Numeracy	Speak so others can understand	- Speak to communicate
Oral Communication	Listen actively	- Engage in discussion
Thinking Skills	Observe critically	Reading
- Problem Solving	DECISION-MAKING SKILLS	-Read and understand
- Decision Making	Solve problems and make decisions	- Read and obtain information
- Job Task Planning &	Plan	Writing
- Organizing	Use math to solve problems and communicate	- Write to communicate
- Significant Use of Memory	INTERPERSONAL SKILLS	NUMERACY
- Finding Information	Cooperate with others	Understanding and using mathematical information
Working with Others	Guide others	- Read numbers and understand
Computer Use	Advocate and influence	- specify and describe practical problems
Continuous Learning	Resolve conflict and negotiate	Calculating and manipulating mathematical information
	LIFELONG LEARNNG SKILLS	- Generate results which make sense
Note: All three nations have also produced standards for English language [ESL/ ESOL] instruction through government or professional association auspices.	Take responsibility for learning	Interpreting results and communicating mathematics information
	Learn through research	- Present and explain results
	Reflect and evaluate	
	Use information and communications technology	

In the United Kingdom, the Qualification and Curriculum Authority [14] has published national standards for adult literacy and numeracy (Table 2.4, column 3). The standards also present competencies of progression through three entry levels of skill and two more advanced levels of skill. These standards have been used to develop a national curriculum and the Basic Skills Agency of the UK has conducted teacher training and certification programs to implement the new standards and basic skills curriculum across England.

Contextualized Instruction. In the United Kingdom, the national standards for adult literacy and numeracy are being used by the Basic Skills Agency to develop new teaching materials that will permit teachers to customize their instruction in a number of functional contexts linked to work-related programs, to National Vocational Qualifications or other qualifications, or to other contexts of adult's interests and hobbies so that teachers can more successfully re-engage adults in learning[2].

In the United States, the Equipped for the Future (EFF)[13] project has engaged teachers in developing problem-oriented activities that help adults acquire the EFF standards in functional contexts related to adult's life roles as parents/family members, workers, or citizen/community members.

In Canada, the National Summit on Literacy and Productivity [1] recommended that adult literacy education programs be developed that make literacy immediately relevant to participants by ensuring they relate to the adults in functional, relevant contexts, such as workplace literacy, family literacy, tax preparation programs, etc.

5. Accountability of Provision: improving methods for determining achievements of programs in terms of student learning outcomes and broader impacts for the adult, family, workplace and community.

In both the United Kingdom and the United States, new initiatives for accountability have been formally integrated into new national adult basic skills reform strategies. In the U.K, new national literacy and numeracy examinations are being developed to evaluate and certify the outcomes of adult learning in basic skills programs.[2] In the U.S. a new National Reporting System has been implemented to capture a wide variety of data on demographics, attendance, and outcomes in programs that are a part of the Adult Education and Literacy System of the U.S., that is, those 4,000 or so programs that receive at least some of their funding through the federal Adult Education and Family Literacy Act of 1998.[7]

In Canada, the National Summit on Literacy and Productivity[1] recommended that adult literacy education programs be integrated into a pan-Canadian system of adult education and lifelong learning and that structures should be created to support such a system. Participants thought this should include an accountability framework that includes evaluation and assessment, best practices, benchmarks, and reporting back processes.

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